Bureau 13
Novels
by Nick Pollotta

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WILDSIDE PRESS

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BUREAU 13: Judgement Night

By Nick Pollotta
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CHAPTER ONE

Got one!" Mindy Jennings shouted, pulling back on the rod and reeling in the line, the ratchet whizzing away loudly.

Net in hand, Raul Horta crawled forward in the boat and soon another rainbow trout was added to the growing collection of edible prisoners in the old tin washtub in the middle of the rowboat.

I watched the whole thing with an air of resignation. It had been my idea for the team to come up here to the Catskill for our vacation and everybody was catching the limit, but me. Ah, what the hell. Didn't like fish. Not really. I was a meat-and-potatoes kind of guy. Thank god there was a freezer full of barbecued ribs waiting in the cabin.

Congratulations for the catch were tossed about from the rest of my crew, and in a polite array of plonks, the lines hit the water again in a neatly staged series.

Once more, the war twixt man and fish commenced. We had been out on the lake for half the morning, doing it up royal, each of us grimly determined to have fun. Mindy was in the rear of the rowboat battling the fish for supremacy. Next to her, Raul Horta was experimenting with some goofball mail-order electric fish catcher. Damn things never worked, but still he tried. Balancing the front of the boat, Father Michael Xavier Donaher and I were just drinking beer, swapping lies and occasionally summoning fat trout to their deaths. Alone as usual, Jessica Taylor was in a skimpy bikini and practicing dives off a floating wood platform. In an even skimpier red speedo, Richard Anderson was lying on the beach working on his always perfect tan. Dressed in Army fatigues, George Renault was reclining in a lawn chair on the dock, happily field stripping his M60 machine gun. For George, that was as close to fun as he got. The man simply liked our line of work too damn much. He was also paranoid. But for someone in the Bureau, that was a very healthy attitude.

The yellow sun was shining in an azure sky dotted with puffy white clouds. Birds were twittering in the lush green forest lining the shore. The lake was smooth and clear. I kind of felt that we were living in a postcard. All in all, we were doing a fine job of forgetting Jimmy's death.

I shook my head and cast again, the line whizzing out to hit amid the weeds, sending a splash into the air. A month ago in Chicago, we had finally tracked down a mad scientist with a poor copy of Victor Von Frankenstein's medical journal he had downloaded off the Internet. Didn't sound like much, but the doc had joined forces with the local Nazi Party to pay for his experiments. Frankenstein Nazis. Lord, what a fight that had been. Ended with the downtown Chicago convention center in flames, the Sears Tower listing three degrees towards the lake, a helicopter chase above Lake Shore Drive and a multiple bazooka battle that left most of us wounded, the doc and journal burned to a crisp and Jimmy Winslow catching a shell right in the chest. We wanted to try a Resurrect, but there hadn't been enough of him to mop up with a sponge. Our section chief had ordered us on vacation and here we are. Having as

good a time as possible after the recent death of a close friend.

Feeling something in my eye, I laid my rod aside and popped the top on a beer from the plastic cooler. I'd really miss the stupid little bastard. For an incubus, a sex vampire, Jimmy had been an okay guy. In salute, I took a healthy sip. Although, of course, I never would have let him date my kid sister.

Suddenly, a truly thunderous belch from Father Donaher shattered the peaceful silence of the lake. Heads turned, somebody laughed, and the big Irishman blushed crimson.

"Faith, I do apologize," he said, that fake brogue of his dripping shamrocks off every syllable. "I fear Mr. Alvarez's lunchtime offering was a wee bit spicier than my delicate constitution can handle."

Raul offered sympathy, Mindy offered a beer and I told the lot of them to blow it out their ears. I had made that Chicken Ranchero mild enough for a newborn baby to eat, but to hear these sissies talk, you'd think I laced the thing with napalm. Geez, hadn't used more than three pounds of mutant habanero peppers.

Coming from the other side of the lake, a guy in a small dinghy continued rowing our way. Earlier, I had dismissed it as merely another fisherman heading for the deep water in the center of the lake. But I realized now that he was well past that point and coming towards us.

Automatically I stared at him through my sunglasses. When nothing happened, I muttered a curse and stuffed them into my shirt pocket. I'd forgotten that my Bureau sunglasses were in the luggage back at the cabin. These dopey things only blocked sunlight, nothing more.

"Anybody have their sunglasses with them?" Mindy asked in a very casual voice.

Everybody answered in the negative. George probably did, but he was a hundred feet away on the beach. Bureau sunglasses were good, but they do have limits. From that far away, anybody's Kirilian aura would be only a smeary blur.

Taking his sweet time, the guy rowed closer and closer. He was slim, about my height, wearing denims and a cotton work shirt. Back-rowing, he came to a halt about fifty feet away, well clear of our lines.

"Ahoy, there!" he called, through cupped hands. "Have any of you seen a woman and little boy swimming around here today?"

I relaxed. Just a father looking for his misplaced family.

"Sorry," Raul shouted, casting again. "Been here since dawn and haven't seen a soul!"

"When did you last see them?" Father Donaher inquired.

The guy seemed to ignore that. "You sure?" he asked, sounding concerned, almost frightened. "Positive?"

"Absolutely," I answered loudly. "Lake's been deserted all day."

Strangely, that seemed to cheer him and he gave a big smile. "Boy, that's great news."

"Why?" Raul asked, before I could.

In response, the guy insanely stood in his boat. But it didn't rock or tip. Almost as if the thing was nailed to the water. Instinctively, I scratched at my stomach only an inch away from the S&W .357 Magnum in my belly holster. I was also a Bureau paranoid.

"Because," he said smiling, his tooth-filled mouth stretching from ear to ear. "That means there will be no witnesses!"

Not enough for a court of law, but good enough for me. I whipped out the old Smith & Wesson and put two thundering rounds into the dingy right at the water level. There was a blur to my right and a fishing knife thudded into the guy's face. Snarling, I turned around to curse the idiot who had done that. Guy might just have been a harmless loony. No sense

killing him immediately. However, the expression on my friends' faces made me turn again and I dropped my jaw along with the rest of them.

Standing on the water, the guy was already almost twice his original size, his torn clothes falling off him in strips. The skin was changing into scales, horns were sprouting from his head, and his face was splitting in half along the line of the knife, forming a vertical mouth.

"Tunafish!" Raul yelled, rolling up his loose sleeves.

We tightly closed our eyes. Even through the lids, I could faintly see the blinding light burst that our number two wizard generated. However, Water Boy was obviously not cognizant of our code phrases and screamed like a banshee. Made me wonder if the thing was a remote relative of the Irish monster?

Opening my eyes, I found "No Witnesses" clawing at the four eyes on stalks dangling from its bulbous head, its leathery wings beating the water beneath its cloven hooves into a froth. This bastard was definitely on its way to winning the Ugliest Monster of the Year contest.

I pumped a couple more rounds into the amorphous mess, doing no appreciable damage, when the boat suddenly lurched backwards to the sound of creaking oars.

"Pull!" Mindy ordered, fear quaking her voice. "In the name of God, pull for your lives!"

Now that was genuinely strange. I didn't know of anything that Mindy was afraid of, aside from agency paperwork. That was when I noticed that the shore appeared a lot closer than it had a few minutes ago. A hard lump formed in my throat. The water level was lowering. Our guest was draining the lake. Hoo boy. Sitting opposite Raul, I put my whole body into rowing. I was getting a bad feeling that this was no random encounter, but an assassin sent to eliminate our team. Anything strong enough to even attempt that feat was nothing to take lightly.

With ever-increasing velocity, the little craft speed away from the monster. In the bow, I could hear Father Donaher muttering Latin. It sounded vaguely familiar. Exorcism? On the shore, Richard was kneeling on the sand rubbing two sticks together and fat George was hastily shoving an ammunition belt into his M60. God bless all paranoids.

"Describe," I ordered Mindy since she was looking in the correct direction.

"Four times original size," she grunted. "Tusks have been added, along with a chest full of tentacles, an elongated snout and ice."

"Ice?" I echoed.

Raul nodded, sweat glistening on his muscular chest. "Lake is freezing. Fast."

"Well, do something about it!"

He scowled. "Without my books and wand?"

A chill touched my skin and nobody had to tell me that the ice was getting closer. Momentarily it occurred to me that any onlookers would probably discount this whole thing as a movie, or a hallucination, as I would have only a few short years ago. Life was strange that way. But then, working for the Bureau was even stranger. Just ask Admiral Presley of our Space Defense Fleet.

"Michael, whatever you're doing, hurry it along!" I shouted.

"Sorry," the priest sighed, pocketing the Bible. "Didn't work."

"Exorcism?" Raul guessed, through clenched teeth.

"Yep."

A chattering burst of machine gun fire from the shore told me George was in action. I only hoped he had armor-piercing rounds, or something fancy in the belt. I had already tried simple lead to no effect.

"Here it comes!" Mindy shouted, and the boat jerked to a stop.

In a crackling wave, the entire surface of the lake solid ice. At first glance, it appeared relatively thin, but the thickness was visibly increasing by the second. Which gave me an idea. I checked and everybody was wearing sneakers. Raul's were orange with purple lightning bolts and blinking lights, but what the hey.

"Run for it!" I yelled, leaping from the rowboat and scampering cross the ice towards the swimming platform. At the very least, the wooden assembly would give us a stable base to fight from.

"Tunafish!" Raul cried once more, but it wasn't necessary. We were facing in the opposite direction and making time. The ice was smooth as glass and none of us were any too damn nimble, except for Mindy, who was gliding along with her usual ninja grace.

But a few feet away from the platform, Mindy cursed, dropped to her knees and hit the ice with a karate chop. It splintered to pieces, but quickly froze solid again.

"What?" I demanded, stopping alongside her.

She pointed. Swimming just below the surface was a human figure. The ice blurred the face, but I could tell it was Jessica. The beautiful telepath must have been trying to sneak up behind the creature when winter hit. The expression on her face told me there wasn't much time. A dozen plans went through my mind and I chose the fastest.

Pulling the .357, I blew a fast series of holes forming a rough circle. On cue, Mindy hit the ice with a closed fist and this time it cracked into tiny bobbing fragments. We pulled Jessica free and I slung the wet girl over my shoulder. With Mindy's help, we reached the platform. Dry wood sure felt good. As I gave the shivering Jess my shirt, I saw that Bozo Boy was even bigger, had four wings and two heads.

Madre mia, when would this thing stop growing? Silently I offered anybody paying attention my eternal soul for one loaded bazooka. There were no takers. Not surprising. Wasn't much of a soul.

Standing on the edge of the platform, Donaher had his pocket Bible open and was doing the Latin routine once more. I figured a blessing to help protect us from evil.

"Amen," he said pulling a tiny vial from inside his shirt and pouring the contents into the lake.

Holy water?

Instantly, a section of ice melted and a spiderweb of cracks exploded outward to spread across the lake with lightning speed. The chunks dissolved and as the open water reached Big Icky, its clawed hooves burst into flame and the dinghy disappeared. Howling and shrieking, the nightmarish thing flapped its way into the sky.

Arcing over us, a lance of fire reached out from shore to hose the beast from claws to horn. Keening in what sounded like real pain, the monster seriously beat wings and headed for the distant clouds.

"Its going to come back," Jessica warned, fingertips resting on temples.

"So swim for shore!" Mindy cried, diving into the water.

Pausing at the edge of the platform, Raul gave me a consoling look before he also dove. It was appreciated. Might have been only ten meters to shore, but I am perhaps the worst swimmer in North America since Rod 'The Rock' Kinnison.

"Send the boat!" I suggested when Father Donaher pushed me from behind. I went under with a splash, and after a short eternity came to the surface blowing water out of my nose. Frantically dog paddling for the shore, I wondered what the penance was for killing a priest.

I sighed with relief when land was under my sneakers, and stumbling from the cold water I joined the rest of my team waiting impatiently on the grass. Then the seven of us sprinted for the log cabin where all of our stuff was kept. Or rather, everything we took on vacation. Our motor home and heavy weapons were parked safe in town some thirty miles away. Might as well have been on the moon.

Gathering on the porch, we kept a watchful scan on the sky.

"Run, or make a stand?" Richard asked, breathing hard. His red speedo had shrunk in the water to a shocking size, his right hand clenched at his side, feeling for a wizard wand not there. Good question. Our jeep could easily hold the lot of us and boasted a top speed of sixty. However, its open sides offered us no protection, the road was laughable and the Winged Wonder could probably do sixty in its sleep.

Cracking open my exhausted weapon, I dropped the spent brass and slide in a speedloader of fresh rounds.

"Cabin," I decided.

Piling inside, we barricaded the doors with furniture, then closed and locked the wooden shutters and the windows. This was accomplished without conversation. We've done this sort of stuff before. But our next step was not so obvious.

"Council," I ordered, and they gathered around. "Summary. It resembles every nasty thing in the world combined, likes water and ice, dislikes fire and holy water."

"And it lies," Jessica added, tucking a pert breast back into the bikini top it had inadvertently popped out of while she ran. Feeling my face flush, I did my best to ignore the action.

"So it's demonic in nature," Mindy said eagerly, her eyes starting to brighten with the prospect of battle. "That's a start at least. Dick, Raul, did you recognize it?"

Both of the wizards shook heads. I knew how much they wished for their gear and once again I cursed myself for making the mages leave the stuff behind. But it was well known that if you don't sit on them occasionally, wizards would do nothing all day but play with their wands. No joke intended.

"Jessica, any chance of doing a Mind Blast?" I asked hopefully.

The lady psychic stared. "Against that behemoth? No way."

"Father?"

Over by the porch, Donaher let the window curtain drop back into place.
"Sorry, Ed, did my best already."

True enough. Evil clerics might have more destructive spells than a Catholic priest, but they sure weren't the kind of folk you really wanted to pal around with. Or turn your back on.

"Okay," I said, biting a lip. "Then its physical weapons." Pulling out my .357 Magnum I checked the load. It was a combo load, two cold iron, two silver, and two steel-jacketed hollow point bullets. Damn.

"The thing doesn't like fire, so I'll light the fireplace," Jessica offered, moving across the living room. Defense was always her best talent.

"And the oven," Mindy reminded, flipping her sword through the air. "Hey, isn't there kerosene in the basement?"

I smiled. "Way to go, killer. There's a couple of ten gallon cans in storage."

Shouting a war whoop, Mindy sheathed her blade and disappeared down the stairs. Personally, I was pleased by her reaction. I knew the martial artist would have preferred to go hand-to-hand with the creature. But there are times when even her deadly fists and indestructible sword just won't do the job required.

“We’ll need soap powder and a funnel,” Richard said, dashing into the kitchen. The mage knew exactly what we were doing. This was a recipe everybody had memorized. Basic Monster Fighting, Chapter One.

“There are soda bottles on the porch,” Raul offered, “And some sheets that can be cut into fuses.”

Filling a bucket with water, I told him not to bother. “Go assist Mindy with the kerosene. I have a plan, and we may get out of this yet. George, how many rounds remaining?”

“Fifty-seven,” George replied from his position by the door, not bothering to count the length of linked shells dangling from his ungainly weapon. “Steel-tipped, armor-piercing.”

“Save ‘em.”

“Check.”

A click-clack sounded from the bedroom and out walked Donaher holding a pump-action 12-gauge shotgun. The antique was not ours, it had come with the cabin.

“Ten shells,” he announced. “Double-ought buck.”

Better and better. As the group got busy, I surveyed the cabin and tried to outline my battle plan. The exterior consisted of hundred year old oak logs cemented into place. The interior walls were lined with antique brick, the floor made of modern concrete. Wood beams thick as a Volvo supported the ceiling, and the roof itself was butt-braced slate, capable of carrying a winter’s accumulated snowfall. I may have goofed on not letting the crew bring their toys along, but I sure wasn’t stupid enough to bunk us in a place that would crumble at the first sign of trouble.

With the good Father’s help, we shoved the bookcases in front of the windows and blocked the door with the big sofa bed. Yeah, perfect, if we can just finish in time we might stand a chance.

Just then, a tremendous thump sounded on the roof, the whole building gave a mighty creak and the windows shattered. Aw crap. Peeking through a shutter, I saw a couple of scaly lengths, thick as tree trunks, blocking the exit.

“Something is coiled about the place, trying to crush us,” I announced as a rain of dust fell from the rafters and the cabin groaned. “Most likely Laughing Boy has polymorphed again.”

“Thanks for the news flash,” Mindy snorted, returning with the kerosene cans from the basement.

The containers sloshed full and Raul hauled them to the kitchen. While I kept guard with the Magnum, Mindy held the funnel steady so that Richard could pour laundry soap into the metal fuel containers. Styrofoam worked better, but we didn’t have time to dice disposable coffee cups.

Father Donaher worked the pump on the shotgun, chambering a round. “Following the basic rules on demons, the beasty probably can not enter this dwelling without our permission. However, there is nothing to prevent it from crushing the place to ruins and then snacking on us like organic trail mix.”

“Oh, shut up and do a prayer,” Richard snapped, screwing the cap onto the finished can, placing it next to the other. For some reason, wizards get rather testy when their lives depend on non-magical solutions. The big sissies.

Solemnly Donaher crossed himself and lowered his head. “Lord, please don’t let us die.”

“Amen!” everybody chorused.

In a thunder of splintering wood, the porch collapsed. I took that as the cue to move.

“Michael, nine o’clock at the door,” I shouted, and the priest took a position to the left of the jamb, his shotgun at the ready. “Raul, flip over the kitchen table. Jess, six o’clock with the cans. George, behind the table. Anybody got a Magic Marker?”

With a flourish, Richard pulled a felt-tip pen out of thin air and handed it to me. A magic marker, ha. I said thanks and ordered him to the living room with everybody else. As the skinny man raced to obey, it occurred to me how odd it felt giving orders to a person who had been in the Bureau so much longer than me. But over the years, the chief decided I was a natural leader. Especially in combat situations. I didn’t consider myself smarter than Richard, just meaner and faster. Guess that amounted to the same thing.

Drawing a mark on the door, I stepped to the broken window and cocked the hammer on the .357 Magnum.

“This is gonna be tight, people!” I shouted over the groaning of the rafter beams. A crack appeared in the slate roof and a clutter of stones fell from the fireplace. “Ready? Three. Two. One, go!”

Crossing my fingers in a primitive luck ceremony, I emptied my Magnum at the snake body which was bending and cracking the woodwork on the window. The bullets merely ricocheted off the scales. But the muscular lengths instinctively tightened to block any escape attempt. Which meant the rest of its body would be shifting a bit to allow the contraction. Exactly what I was counting on.

“Now!” I cried, pointing at Donaher. His shotgun booming a gaping hole appeared in the wooden door.

“Jess, go!”

As if reading my thoughts, the telepath hopped on the couch, lowered the two cans through the hole and placed them atop the coil just below the jagged opening.

“Scat!” I commanded, and they ran for the imagined safety of the living room. Soon as they were clear, I crouched behind the upturned table and hit George on the leg. In a stuttering roar, the M60 cut loose, tracing a line of holes through the sofa, the door and the cans beyond.

For almost a full second I thought the trick wouldn’t work. Then the world exploded in flame as those twin ten-gallon Molotov cocktails outside did their favorite thing. The sofa, door and table offered us some protection from the blast, but the heat flash bellowed into the kitchen to cook the air from our lungs and we fell to our knees coughing. Lord, I would never be mean to a French fry again.

Above the noise of the detonation, we could hear a hideous screaming that wassailed and wailed. Violently, the cabin shook to its foundation, a roof beam cracked, the fireplace collapsed and then everything went terribly still.

Smoke was pouring into the kitchen, making it impossible to breathe. But that was no problem. We simply scampered through the gaping ruin of the porch and onto the lawn. The sight of the giant thing flapping into the horizon was more beautiful than any sunset I could remember.

“Well look at that,” Richard muttered, crossing his arms. “I wonder why the kerosene is sticking to it so well?”

Sword in hand, Mindy smiled. “I added a tube of epoxy glue to the Molotovs as an added bonus.”

Shifting position, George shouldered his ungainly machine gun to rest the stock on a hip. “Where the heck did you get epoxy from?”

“My purse,” she replied, “Its perfect for repairing broken fingernails.”
it’s secret girl stuff, Jessica explained.

We had a shaky laugh at that, and started slapping shoulders in triumphant. But the victory celebration was unexpectedly cut short when our Bureau wristwatches began beeping the emergency recall signal.